

21 October  
8 AM Morning Prayer

Some 500 years ago Cardinal Richelieu established a committee of 40 scholars, the Academy of Literature to write the first French dictionary. Long after the task was completed, the group, now known as the Immortals, has continued. Their mandate has been expanded from writing the official French dictionary to maintaining the purity of their native language. For decades it was keeping English words out of the language; now it is a challenge because of the rapid advances in technology. It has been a monumental challenge in the last few decades because all of the new words created with the rise of computers, many of which are in English.

For those of you who have ever made so much as a stab at learning French, the first thing you had to remember was that all nouns were either masculine or feminine. It has been that way for centuries, but more recently, there has been a strong movement for gender neutrality. Maintaining the purity of their language and yet responding to a changing world has become very, very difficult for the Immortals. How do they maintain the beauty and purity of an ancient language in a rapidly changing society?

We understand their plight.

When we first began exploring the idea of Morning Prayer today, Reverend John Meengs offered his Book of Common Prayer from the middle of the 1800s. We thought long and hard about it. To be sure, it is the liturgy and rite that would have been used when All Saints' first became a parish, but then we decided to use the 1929 service. We thought about it, as I said, but then made our decision. You see, the older prayer book would have been historically accurate for our church, but it is so far in the past. Instead, we chose the 1929 Morning Prayer liturgy because for some, perhaps many of us, it was the book we used when we were growing up. Some of you received a copy of the Prayer Book when you were confirmed, and you treasured it as a tangible symbol of your spiritual safari.

That is a good and wonderful thing, a blessing, because you can hold in your hands part of your past, remembering people and places, good times and bad, and so much more. For you, even if for no one else, it is a sacred object.

To take the proverbial trip down memory lane is, as I just said, a blessing. To engage in a bit of re-enacting can be useful and give us greater insight, but for it to have spiritual meaning it takes review and education. To live in the past is quite another matter, for the whole ethos of Christianity is to be forward-looking. Yes, we remember and learn from the past, but we don't try to go back in time and stay there.

I seriously doubt we would want to return and dwell in the earliest days of this parish. A coal or wood furnace for heat, when it worked and the temperatures weren't too cold. No indoor plumbing. Only candles or

kerosene lanterns on dark mornings or at evening services. A reed parlour pump organ for music. Anyone eager for hoop skirts or gentlemen in frock coats? We have become dependent on our modern conveniences. So it is with each revision of the Prayer Book since the 1500s. The language changes, but the liturgy and the eternal truths remain the same. The emphasis always is on the worship of God and our commitment to following Jesus.

We take our direction from the Day of Pentecost, five weeks after the Resurrection of our Lord. Literally tens of thousands of Jews from around the western world had flooded into Jerusalem to celebrate Passover. For some, especially those who had come from a great distance, it was a once in a life time experience. Many of them intentionally stayed on for five more weeks to celebrate the holy day of Pentecost. They used their time to explore the Holy City, to meet with others, and above all to worship and study at the Temple.

On the day of Pentecost, after the worship, they prepared to go home. And just at that moment, as perhaps the last spiritual message or lesson they would receive, the Holy Spirit came to the disciples and they began to speak of Jesus. Jesus, they said, was the long awaited Messiah - the complete and final fulfilment of everything in the Law and the prophets.

Far more significant was that these people from around the Mediterranean Basin, could hear this message in their own language, in words they could understand without a translator. They could hear it, think about it, perhaps discuss it with others on the long journey back home. God chose to use this gift of clear language to have the story told of His son.

Centuries later, in the midst of World War Two, C S Lewis was hired by the British Broadcasting Corporation to give fifteen minute radio lectures. The transcripts were later collected and became the book many of us cherish - Mere Christianity. Both the radio series and the book were very well received by millions of people - many of them in uniform or had loved ones in uniform.

But his friends at Oxford were appalled. Like Lewis, they were intellectuals, academics, scholarly men who spoke in a language of their own. How sad, how tragic, that a brilliant man like Lewis would use the modern technology of the wireless to broadcast his message. Indeed - broadcast - to just anyone. They were appalled that he would write a book for the masses.

One day at the Eagle and Child pub in Oxford where Lewis, Tolkien, and others met for a pint or two and conversation, they criticized him. Lewis lit his pipe to give him time to think, and said, "I am a plain bluff man speaking to plain bluff men about faith." In other words, I am talking about faith and my experiences in language others can understand. But right there we get a glimpse of the challenge. It's the word 'bluff'. It had meaning in the 1940s, today it is a very archaic word.

So it has always been. At the height of the Renaissance when there was an almost universal quest for knowledge and understanding, men dared translate the Latin Bible, the Vulgate, into European languages so everyone could hear and understand it. Zwingli took it a step further, announcing to his congregation that he was going to use the Gospel of St Matthew as his sermon text for the next year. The pews were full, people stood, others had to stand outside on the church steps to hear. That's how eager they were for the words of Scripture to be told in a language they could understand.

King James of England commanded religious leaders to translate the Latin Bible into modern English, and the result was the King James Version. But by the late 1800s, all of those Elizabethan era words were getting in the way - all those begats, saiths, and more. St Paul wrote about faith, hope, and charity. At the time it meant love, but over the years the meaning changed and people thought of it as contributing money to benevolent causes. The result was the Revised Standard Version, and less than a century later the American Revised Standard or American Standard. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, as a way of encouraging a new generation to study God's word, came the paraphrases such as the Good News Bible.

As we learn from even a short look at the French Academia for Literature, language is forever changing, and if it is to be a truly useful tool, whether in a dictionary or our Anglican liturgy, we must always be certain that we use words that others find enriching to their lives. Like the disciples on Pentecost, we must keep in mind the need for speaking the language people use.

I'm grateful for this return to the past this Sunday morning, but Christ is always beckoning us forward to go into the world to make believers, baptize them in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and constantly build up His Kingdom. And for those of us who have the 1928 Prayer Book, treasure it. As I said a few moments ago, when you hold it in your hands you are connecting with your past - people, places, and events. That's God's blessing to you.